

# Influenza Fact Sheet

## **Influenza is a viral infection of the lungs and airways that is also known as “the flu”**

Anyone can get influenza. Every year, about 5-20% of the US population gets influenza. Influenza is spread from person to person by coughing and sneezing, and also by direct contact with infected people or objects they contaminate with their respiratory droplets, such as door handles. Influenza can be a serious disease that causes severe complications such as pneumonia. It can also make heart disease or chronic lung disease worse. In the United States, it is estimated that about 36,000 deaths are caused by influenza each year.

## **Symptoms of influenza might sometimes be confused with the common cold**

Because colds and flu share many symptoms, it can be difficult (or even impossible) to tell the difference between them based on symptoms alone. Special lab tests can tell if you have the flu but are often not necessary. In general, the flu is worse than the common cold, and symptoms such as fever, body aches, extreme tiredness, and dry cough are more common and intense. Colds are usually milder than the flu. People with colds are more likely to have a runny or stuffy nose. Symptoms of influenza usually start 1 to 3 days after being exposed to the influenza virus. Most persons feel better after several days but cough and tiredness may last two weeks or more. Stomach cramps and diarrhea are not typical symptoms of influenza, but can occur, and are more common in children.

## **There are ways to treat influenza**

For the quickest recovery from influenza, get plenty of rest; drink fluids like juice, water, or hot tea; and take an aspirin substitute for muscle aches and fever (but **never** give aspirin to children or teenagers who have flu-like symptoms – and particularly fever – without first speaking to your doctor.). **Do not** give any medication including over-the-counter remedies to a child without first consulting with your pediatrician. A physician may also prescribe certain antiviral medications. These medications may make symptoms milder if taken within 1 to 2 days of when symptoms begin.

## **Look Out for Emergency Warning Signs**

There are some “emergency warning signs” that require urgent medical attention.

**In children**, some emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- High or prolonged fever
- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids (dehydration)
- Changes in mental status, such as not waking up or not interacting; being so irritable that the child does not want to be held; or seizures
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- Worsening of underlying chronic medical conditions (for example, heart or lung disease, diabetes)

**In adults**, some emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- High or prolonged fever
- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest
- Near-fainting or fainting

- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting

**If you see these warning signs, or other unusually severe symptoms, seek medical care immediately**, either by calling your healthcare provider or going to an emergency room. When you arrive, tell the receptionist or nurse about your symptoms. You may be asked to wear a mask and/or sit in a separate area to protect others from getting sick.

### **Yearly vaccination is the most important way to prevent influenza**

People at higher risk of complications should get the influenza vaccine each year. The best time to get the influenza vaccine is as soon as it is available, but any time during the flu season is still a good time to get vaccinated. It takes about 2 weeks after vaccination to develop protection against the influenza virus. Past infection with influenza or immunization with the influenza vaccine does not protect a person from getting influenza the next year because influenza strains change from one season to the next.

### **There are two types of vaccines**

- The "flu shot" – an inactivated vaccine (containing killed virus) that is given with a needle. The flu shot is approved for use in people 6 months of age and older, including healthy people and people with chronic medical conditions.
- The nasal-spray flu vaccine – a vaccine made with live, weakened flu viruses that do not cause the flu (sometimes called LAIV for “Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine”). LAIV is approved for use in healthy people 2-49 years of age who are not pregnant.

### **Who should get vaccinated**

In general, anyone who wants to reduce their chances of getting the flu can get vaccinated. The CDC’s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommends that certain people should get vaccinated every year, including:

#### **People who should receive influenza vaccination include:**

- Children aged 6 months up to their 19th birthday
- Pregnant women
- People 50 years of age and older
- People of any age with certain chronic medical conditions
- People who live in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities
- People who live with or care for those at high risk for complications from flu, including:
  - Health care workers
  - Household contacts of persons at high risk for complications from the flu
  - Household contacts and out of home caregivers of children less than 6 months of age (these children are too young to be vaccinated)

There are some people who should not be vaccinated without first consulting a physician. These include

- People who have a severe allergy to chicken eggs.
- People who have had a severe reaction to an influenza vaccination.
- People who developed Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS) within 6 weeks of getting an influenza vaccine.

- Children less than 6 months of age (influenza vaccine is not approved for this age group), and
- People who have a moderate-to-severe illness with a fever (they should wait until they recover to get vaccinated.)

### **Influenza vaccine may rarely cause serious side effects in some people**

Different side effects can be associated with the flu shot and LAIV.

**The flu shot:** The viruses in the flu shot are killed (inactivated), so you cannot get the flu from a flu shot. Some minor side effects that could occur are soreness, redness, or swelling where the shot was given, fever (low grade), and aches. If these problems occur, they begin soon after the shot and usually last 1 to 2 days. Almost all people who receive influenza vaccine have no serious problems from it. However, on rare occasions, flu vaccination can cause serious problems, such as severe allergic reactions. As of July 1, 2005, people who think that they have been injured by the flu shot can file a claim for compensation from the [National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program \(VICP\)](http://www.hrsa.gov/Vaccinecompensation) (<http://www.hrsa.gov/Vaccinecompensation>).

**LAIV (FluMist®):** The viruses in the nasal-spray vaccine are weakened and do not cause severe symptoms often associated with influenza illness. (In clinical studies, transmission of vaccine viruses to close contacts has occurred only rarely.) In children, side effects from LAIV (FluMist®) can include runny nose, wheezing, headache, vomiting, muscle aches, and fever. In adults, side effects from LAIV (FluMist®) can include runny nose, headache, sore throat, and cough.

### **More information on flu vaccination can be found at**

CDC Flu Vaccination Information: <http://cdc.gov/flu/protect/vaccine/index.htm>

Flu Shot: <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/pubs/vis/downloads/vis-flu.pdf>

Nasal Spray: <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/pubs/vis/downloads/vis-flulive.pdf>

### **Aside from vaccination, there are steps you can take to prevent spreading influenza to others:**

Wash your hands often, especially after coughing, sneezing, and wiping or blowing the nose.

Cover your mouth when coughing or sneezing.

Use paper tissues when wiping or blowing your nose; throw tissues away after each use.

Stay away from crowded living and sleeping spaces, if possible.

Stay home and avoid contact with other people to protect them from catching your illness.